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The spy game will be with us forever, but even spies must play by the rules

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Washington

It is much like a baseball game, except the stakes are somewhat higher. Both sides go at each other with vigor, occasionally anger. But there are rules. When someone breaks a rule, the other side protests. Sometimes they are serious.

At first, President Reagan said he was "resentful" of the shooting of an American Army officer by a Soviet guard in East Germany. Later he went through the motions of being angrier than that.

At first, other U.S. officials denied that the officer had broken any of the rules of the game he was playing, which goes by the name of military intelligence. He was at least 300 yards from a restricted zone, they said. Then the State Department called in second-level Soviet diplomats and military attaches here to protest.

It brought back a gusher of memories.

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At the U.S. Embassy on Moscow's ring boulevard, I used to look out a window toward the Moskva River and the giant radio tower that emitted ground-wave jamming to protect citizens of the Soviet capital from Western short-wave broadcasts.

I was in the office of the political counselor assigned to monitor Soviet-Chinese affairs. Those were the days when Khrushchev and Mao were calling each other names, when the world's biggest Communist powers split. For many hours, the American diplomat and I sat at that window with our feet up on a radiator and discussed each move in the Moscow-Peking war of nerves.

How much more sensitive material was discussed in that office, in that period of the Cuban and Berlin crises, the nuclear test-ban negotiations and similar strategic questions, is easy to assume.

Just after I left my Moscow assignment, a brief news story told how U.S. technicians had found a Soviet microphone installed behind the radiator where we had propped our feet so many afternoons. Of course, the Russians professed no knowledge of it.

One morning in 1963, I awoke to find that a dozen of my British and American friends had disappeared, figuratively. They were diplomats, attaches, the American Embassy doctor, a British consular officer, his wife and child — all declared persona non grata by the Soviet government.

It was the first unfolding of the Oleg P[illegible]kovsky case, in which the Russians finally caught up with the most productive agent our side ever had inside the Soviet military-scientific hierarchy (as far as we know publicly).

The British consul, our apartment-house neighbor, was the main funnel for intelligence from Penkovsky, who smuggled secrets that figured vitally in the Cuban missile showdown and helped our side assess Soviet strategic nuclear progress. Penkovsky passed microfilm to the consul's child in a box of chocolates.

I learned that while I was leaning in between Nikita Khrushchev and Benny Goodman as they argued about jazz and abstract painting at the American ambassador's July Fourth party, a few feet away Penkovsky had been planting more secrets in a soap tin in the toilet tank of the men's room. But our side denied any knowledge of the whole affair — although later the CIA supported a book about it that made the agency look brilliant and the KGB stupid.

There was the time a U.S. naval attache was picked up by Soviet police alongside the harbor in Leningrad. Soviet papers ran photos of him and his Harpo Marx-style overcoat, festooned inside with tape recorders and cameras.

Only years later did the story break about how our side had been picking up conversations between Leonid Brezhnev and his high-level comrades as they drove about Moscow in their ZIL limousines.

In Moscow, we assumed many of our Western friends and all our Soviet acquaintances were in the intelligence business, and part of life there was guessing who was who. In Berlin in those days, at the height of the Cold War, every other person seemed to be a spook.

Anyone who thinks anything has changed in the past 20 years is naive.

Many techniques of intelligence are different. Satellites record and computers decipher data no mere man could gather or figure out alone. The roofs of our embassy in Moscow and every Soviet bloc diplomatic building here are loaded down with antennae.

The new Soviet Embassy here is on the town's highest hilltop, in line of sight with the Pentagon and its microwave message traffic. U.S. sources just disclosed that the [illegible]ans had planted bugs in a dozen electric typewriters in our embassy in Moscow, which picked up what was typed on those machines and transmitted it via antennae hidden in the walls.

The advance of such technology runs far beyond the nonspecialist's imagination. But just as in computerized, laserized warfare the infantry still must do the dirty work, in intelligence the chances still have to be taken by the spy on the ground.

Most of the time his work seems drudgery. The Soviet diplomat who goes up to Capitol Hill and comes home with briefcase bulging with committee records and technical reports risks nothing more than minor embarrassment. The dozens of Soviet citizens who work as secretaries, mechanics and plumbers in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow are not likely to get hurt on the job.

But there are some who have to take a chance now and then. Some are in exotic places carrying out assignments that would fit into James Bond thrillers. Some, like the major who got shot last week in East Germany and his Soviet counterparts stationed in West Germany, must do low-level, unglamorous scut work that can turn out by surprise to be dangerous.

After our side's initial denials that the major had been close to anything delicate, U.S. officials got around to conceding that well, actually he had been taking pictures through the window of a military building. Moscow said he opened the window to take the pictures, then fled and was shot when he failed to halt after a warning shot by the guard.

Authorities here and at Geneva said the incident would not affect the Soviet-American arms control talks. Those negotiations are far bigger than the death of one man in the line of duty.

But our side had to make a modest fuss, to register its carefully measured protest. Arresting the major, confiscating his film, sending him out of the Communist country would have been acceptable. Shooting him was not. If the game is to go on, both sides must play by the rules.

And hypocrisy is part of the game.

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